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‘Destiny seems to point me to that country’: early nineteenth-century African American migration, emigration, and expansion*

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Abstract

Traditional American historiography has dismissed the Liberian settlement scheme as impractical, racist, and naïve. The movement of Americans to Liberia, and other territorial and extraterritorial destinations, however, reveals the ‘push’ and ‘pull’ factors that influenced movement in the African diaspora. The reaction of different African Americans to these factors influenced the political and social development of Liberia as well as the colony’s image at home. Africans migrating within and beyond US borders participated in a broader movement of people and the development of settler ideology in the nineteenth century.

Keywords African American, emigration, expansion, Liberia, settler society

Introduction

In January 1832, a free black woman from Philadelphia wrote to the abolitionist newspaper, the *Liberator*, requesting that her compatriots ‘ought to manifest that spirit of independence which shines so conspicuously in the character of Europeans, by leaving the land of oppression and emigrating where we may be received and treated as brothers’.¹ She proposed Mexico as a destination for free black Americans, disparaging the project currently underway in Liberia, the result of the American Colonization Society (ACS)’s efforts to ameliorate slavery by transporting manumitted or free African Americans to Africa.

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1 *Liberator*, 2, 4, 28 January 1832, p. 14.

The ACS was founded in 1816 by white philanthropists, Quaker ministers, and slave owners with the idea of establishing a colony for manumitted slaves and free African Americans, and it had formed the colony of Liberia in West Africa by 1822, after several failed attempts.² When considered in isolation, the plan to settle African Americans in Liberia seems futile and the African Americans who participated naïve.³ However, when it is placed in its context, as one of a number of emigrationist plans taking shape throughout the world, it becomes clear that global ideas about migration and colonization shaped black experiences in the early US Republic. In the second quarter of the nineteenth century, pressing concerns about slavery, freedom, trade, labour, and democracy led to an increased interest among Americans of all races in expansion and migration. As with the rhetoric of the Colonization School in Britain, whose ‘ministers were giving official encouragement to private schemes removing people from the western Highlands of Scotland, Ireland and the English counties and relocating them in colonial sites such as the St. Lawrence River Valley’, migration was proposed as a solution to all manner of US domestic concerns, from slavery, to a mixed-race society, to poverty, to Malthusian overpopulation.⁴ African Americans participated in these discussions, and their plans for emigration included migration to the newest states to enter the Union, the western territories of the US, Mexico, Canada, Central and South America, Haiti, Sierra Leone, Liberia, and, eventually, the Niger Valley.⁵ Even the initial response of the enslaved Chesapeake African Americans bound for New Orleans who commandeered the *Creole* in 1841 was to head to Liberia.⁶ What directed the decision to participate in the global migrations of the nineteenth century, and how did the impulse to

2 ACS membership included both slaveholders and non-slaveholders, including several signatories of the Declaration of Independence, George Washington’s nephew, Bushrod, and Senator Henry Clay. For more on the creation of Liberia, see Richard West, *Back to Africa: a history of Sierra Leone and Liberia*, London: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1970; Amos J. Beyan, *The American Colonization Society and the creation of the Liberian state*, Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1991; Susan M. Ryan ‘Errand into Africa: colonization and nation building in Sarah J. Hale’s Liberia’, *New England Quarterly*, 68, 4, 1995, pp. 558–83.

3 For examples of this traditional view, see Leslie Alexander, *African or American? Black identity in New York City, 1784–1861*, Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2008, p. 77; Nikki Taylor, ‘Reconsidering the “forced: exodus of 1829: free black emigration from Cincinnati, Ohio to Wilberforce, Canada’, *Journal of African American History*, 87, 2002, pp. 283–302.

4 Alan Lester, *Imperial networks: creating identities in nineteenth-century South Africa and Britain*, London: Routledge, 2001, p. 48.

5 Tunde Adeleke, *UnAfrican Americans: nineteenth-century black nationalists and the civilizing mission*, Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1998, p. 3. James Sidbury and Gary Nash have both explored the rise and fall of African-centred identity and a proto ‘Back to Africa’ movement among free African Americans in the post-Revolutionary North: Gary Nash, *Forging freedom*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988; James Sidbury, *Becoming African in America*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007. See also Tom W. Shick, *Behold the promised land: a history of Afro-American settler society in nineteenth-century Liberia*, Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980; Alfred N. Hunt, *Haiti’s influence on antebellum America: slumbering volcano in the Caribbean*, Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1988, pp. 168, 172; Martin Delaney, *The condition, elevation, emigration, and destiny of the colored people of the United States*, Baltimore, MD: Black Classic Press, 1993 (first published 1852).

6 Philip Troutman, ‘Grapevine in the slave market: African American geopolitical literacy and the 1841 *Creole* revolt’, in Walter Johnson, ed., *The chattel principle*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004, p. 213.

find a land ‘where our rights will not be continually trampled upon’ manifest itself in different groups of African Americans in the antebellum period?⁷

This article looks at the differences and similarities within African American groups, placing them, and their ideas of expansion and migration, in the context of wider nineteenth-century trends. It will first examine the ‘push’ factors that encouraged enslaved and free African Americans to choose emigration, and particularly emigration to Liberia. Then it will move on to look at the growth of free black emigration to Liberia, uncovering the problematic communication of ‘pull’ factors. Next it will examine the counter-movement for North American migration and investigate the class issues that led to the decreasing popularity of emigration to Liberia. Finally, it will show the shifting rhetoric of the 1850s and the changing attitudes that gave rise to a new interest in emigration to Africa.

Looking more closely at the letters and newspapers produced in Liberia and using sources from abolitionist and colonizationist materials from a number of American archives, this article explores the conflicts in African American expansionist discourses, the function of the West in certain regional black identifications, and the important role of Liberian settler exchanges with America and with Africa in the shaping of African American migration choices in the era before the American Civil War. Although the traditional account of African American rejection of the ACS is not wholly wrong – it was always a marginal project – its totalizing narrative obscures the choices of those who did go, as well as the decision process of those who rejected extraterritorial emigration but chose to move within North America. Looking at the project in its global comparative context helps to trouble the American national mythologies of abolitionism and anti-imperialism/anti-colonialism. Migration to Liberia is also an important topic for the study of global history, both articulating the continuing importance of the Atlantic World frame in the period after the American War of Independence, and highlighting the African American inputs into US expansionism on the North American continent and globally.

A changing approach to Liberian history

This article answers a call in recent literature to further explore the role of the African diaspora in global history. While much global history writing about Africa has dealt with the movement of people, its focus on the period 1500–1800, or even 1450–1850,⁸ ensures that the primary movement of people being studied is the enslaved. This is understandable, from a methodological perspective, as there has been significant data produced on the transatlantic slave trade, and the origins of global history lie in the historicization of globalized economic exchange, of which the slave trade was a notable part.

However, the African diaspora was involved in more than just the economic exchange of the globe; migration, emigration, and the development of colonization movements tied it into the intellectual history of nineteenth-century expansion as well. Tiffany Ruby Patterson

7 *Liberator*, 28 January 1832, p. 14.

8 Joseph E. Inikori, ‘Africa and the globalization process: western Africa 1450–1850’, *Journal of Global History*, 2, 1, 2007, pp. 63–86.

and Robin D. G. Kelley's work on African diasporas and migrations articulates the distinct role that they played in global history. They argue that any study of the African diaspora should consider 'the contributions of black migrant/colonial intellectuals to rethinking the modern West; and the continual reinvention of Africa and the diaspora through cultural work, migrations, transformations in communications as well as the globalization of capital'.⁹ However, Patterson and Kelley also call for chronological as well as regional variety, moving beyond the Atlantic World historiographical frame to consider interactions with, among other places, the post-independence United States.

A changing approach to US history – one that takes into account the transnational aspects of American development and America's continuous links to the rest of the world – has begun to introduce questions of migration, emigration, capital flows, and ideological development into study of the post-independence period. Ian Tyrrell's survey, *Transnational nation*, provides a new framework for envisioning the global nature of US history, while work by Jay Sexton, James Belich, and Andrew Thompson and Gary Magee has reincorporated the US into the story of the expansion of the English-speaking world in the nineteenth century through studies of settler expansion, migration, remittances, and finance.¹⁰ What remains unaccounted for in these new, more global histories of the nineteenth-century US is the African American contribution to westward expansion, intra-North American migration, and outward migration from the US. Tyrrell provides a brief overview that explores movement of African Americans after the eighteenth century. He even allows that 'free emigration was a phenomenon of the entire African diaspora and reflected the complex circulation of opinion within this transnational community'.¹¹ A more thorough examination of this phenomenon is, however, required.

Some recent work has begun to address these issues, particularly Claude Andrew Clegg's writing on the ACS in North Carolina and Eric Burin's work on Southern manumissions and the type of slaveholder involved in manumission, both of which reintroduced the idea that African Americans may have *chosen* to go to Liberia for any number of reasons.¹² William E. Allen's recent contribution to this historiographical shift provides a solid foundation for reconsidering Liberia and Liberian historiography within the Atlantic World frame.¹³ Another recent article by Richard Douglass-Chin highlights the common linguistic tropes in the narratives of expansion by white explorers in the American West and African

9 Tiffany Ruby Patterson and Robin D. G. Kelley, 'Unfinished migrations: reflections on the African diaspora and the making of the modern world', *African Studies Review*, 43, 1, 2000, p. 13.

10 Ian Tyrrell, *Transnational nation: United States history in global perspective since 1789*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007; Jay Sexton, *Debtor diplomacy: finance and American foreign relations in the Civil War era 1837–1873*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005; James Belich, *Replenishing the earth: the settler revolution and the rise of the Anglo-world, 1783–1939*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009; Andrew Thompson and Gary Magee, *Empire and globalisation*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010.

11 Tyrrell, *Transnational nation*, p. 69, but, more broadly, ch. 5.

12 Claude Andrew Clegg, *The price of liberty: African Americans and the making of Liberia*, Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2004; Eric Burin, *Slavery and the peculiar solution: a history of the American Colonization Society*, Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2005.

13 William E. Allen, 'Liberia and the Atlantic world in the nineteenth century: convergence and effects', *History in Africa*, 37, 2010, pp. 7–49.

American explorers in Liberia.¹⁴ The shift towards examining Liberia from a context of American expansion, Atlantic migration, and the creation of African diaspora identifications is important for understanding the multiplicity of attitudes towards Liberia within the US.

Within the national framework of US history, it is generally agreed that, as a result of growing racism within the ACS, black and white immediatist abolitionists saw colonization as antithetical to African American values and communal ideology. Especially after the publication of David Walker's *Appeal* in 1829, which argued that African Americans ought to stand up against attempts to deny them full nationality, a number of prominent black leaders throughout the 1830s and 1840s rejected the ACS and the colonization of Africa.¹⁵ Historians tend to emphasize that, even in the face of increasing struggles, African American identity emerged as a powerful national force, welded together by united opposition to the ACS.¹⁶ Some acknowledge that a minority of African Americans chose to emigrate, but they continue to downplay the role of Liberia as a viable choice for antebellum black Americans. Chris Dixon, for example, despite his assertion that 'for some blacks, emigrationism – coupled with the establishment of an assertive black nationality – was not only a means of achieving individual self-advancement, but was also a political expression of their racial identity', argues that only 'a few' free blacks emigrated to Liberia in the 1830s and 1840s.¹⁷

Emigration involved more than just a few, however. Just taking the period 1834–47, we find that 218 *free* blacks emigrated, along with 1,673 others, many manumitted for the purpose.¹⁸ The issue is more than just numbers. Minimizing the role of emigration creates significant problems for understanding why certain types of emigration and migration did take place, which individuals chose or did not choose to emigrate, and what reasoning was behind that decision. Patterson and Kelley highlight that 'neither the fact of blackness nor shared experiences under racism nor the historical process of their dispersal makes for community or even a common identity'.¹⁹ By grouping together all Americans of African descent as united in opposition to the ACS, historians make assumptions about the emigration – or otherwise – of African Americans.

In the early nineteenth century, increasingly restrictive laws limited the movement of and property ownership by free or recently manumitted black Southerners, and prevented them

14 Richard Douglass-Chin, 'Liberia as American diaspora: the transnational scope of American identity in the mid-nineteenth century', *Canadian Review of American Studies*, 40, 2, 2010, pp. 213–34.

15 See Nikki Taylor, "'Forced" exodus', p. 288; Hunt, *Haiti's influence*, p. 174.

16 Alexander, *African or American*, p. 153; Peter Hinks, preface in David Walker, *Walker's appeal, in four articles*, ed. Peter P. Hinks, University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000, p. xxix; Leslie Harris, *In the shadow of slavery: African Americans in New York City, 1626–1863*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2003; Richard Newman, *The transformation of American abolitionism: fighting slavery in the early republic*, Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2002.

17 Chris Dixon, *African America and Haiti: emigration and black nationalism in the nineteenth century*, Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2000, pp. 1, 64. Dixon then turns to examine 'the black community's' curiosity about Trinidad. Just as with many other historians of antebellum emigration and anti-slavery, he assumes in his writing that the 'black community' means *free* African Americans because those who were enslaved could not have had any choice in the matter or their interests were spoken for by their free 'brethren'.

18 See Burin, *Slavery*, tables.

19 Patterson and Kelley, 'Unfinished migrations', 19.

from purchasing bank stock or engaging in legitimate finance. Many of their entrepreneurial activities could be undercut by white masters who hired out their slaves.²⁰ Even in cases where restrictions were not enforced, many of those who did manage to accumulate property or engage in commerce were still forced to depend on white patronage.²¹ Given the increasingly restrictive laws after 1831, it is unsurprising that there was some enthusiasm expressed by free African Americans in the Old South for emigration to Africa. Among these were the Virginian Joseph Jenkins Roberts and his family, who immigrated to Liberia in 1829, establishing an African import-export business with Roberts' business partner, William Colson, who remained in Richmond, as well as Louis Sheridan, a prominent free North Carolinian, who was a merchant, planter, and slaveholder before emigrating in the late 1830s.²² Despite the poor press that the ACS received in North Carolina and the ongoing problems facing emigrants, before his emigration Sheridan wrote to the society in 1837 that 'in placing ourselves on that theatre [Liberia] within whose sphere alone it now appears we can think and act and feel within ourselves that we are men . . . if I can be of any use to my kind . . . destiny seems to point me to that country and to that alone'.²³ Thomas Brown, an emigrant who briefly ran a camwood export business before returning to the US, claimed that he went to Liberia with the 'sole object . . . to get rid of the oppressive laws of South Carolina'.²⁴

The factors that propelled Liberian settlers were similar to those that propelled other people participating in migration projects around the world in the same period. Lisa Lindsay's work on Brazilian returnees to Lagos highlights that Bahians were also largely responding to 'Restrictions on employment and ownership of property' that 'combined to force freedpeople into work on large estates, into the informal economic sector, or, for those who could afford it, into trans-Atlantic migration'.²⁵ For British migrants leaving for the formal and informal empire, Magee and Thompson argue that "'The social freedoms that accompanied colonization" proved particularly attractive'.²⁶ Poor Irish, English, Welsh, German, and southern European migrants responded to political repression and economic hardship by emigrating to the US, or into their colonial empires when they had them. The Kru and Glebo of Liberia, similarly, reacted to the imposition of Americo-Liberian colonial

20 Juliet E. K. Walker, *The history of black business in America: capitalism, race, entrepreneurship*, 2nd edition, vol. 1, Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2009, pp. 113, 98.

21 Barbara J. Fields, *Slavery and freedom on the middle ground: Maryland during the nineteenth century*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985, p. 33.

22 Bell I. Wiley, ed., *Slaves no more: letters from Liberia, 1833–1869*, Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1980, p. 2; Marie Tyler-McGraw, *An African republic: black and white Virginians in the making of Liberia*, Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, p. 154; Phil S. Sigler, 'Where the free air blows: the attitudes of free black Americans towards emigration to Liberia, 1817–1865', unpublished paper from the Indiana University Liberian Collections Project (henceforth LCP), p. 4.

23 Library of Congress, American Colonization Society papers (henceforth ACSP), Louis Sheridan to Joseph Gales, Wilmington, NC, 16 February 1836.

24 Historical Society of Pennsylvania (henceforth HSP), *Examination of Thomas C. Brown a free colored citizen of S. Carolina, as to the actual state of things in Liberia in the years 1833 and 1834*, New York, 9 May 1834.

25 Lisa A. Lindsay, "'To return to the bosom of their fatherland": Brazilian immigrants in nineteenth-century Lagos', *Slavery & Abolition*, 15, 1, 1994, pp. 24–5.

26 Magee and Thompson, *Empire and globalisation*, p. 76.

rule and, 'in the absence of viable economic opportunities in Liberia and with increasing political dissatisfaction with the Liberian (colonial) state', migrated to Sierra Leone, the West Indies, and Britain.²⁷

Kru labour migration tended to fall into a pattern common in the nineteenth century. The Kru 'rotated in their jobs, staying a year, resting at home a while, and then going down again to another part of the coast'.²⁸ For Kru migrants out of Liberia, 'the system of labor migration which had developed by the late nineteenth century, though minor when compared to other large scale circular labor migrations, was patterned, continuous, integrated with life at home, and considered an important part of a mature man's development and the community's life'.²⁹ This pattern was similar to other nineteenth-century economic migrations, like those described by Magee and Thompson, which saw a circulation of young, single, male labourers throughout the British world, both British in origin, and contract labourers ('coolies') from China and India.³⁰ These migrants 'went "out", they served their careers, and they returned "home"'.³¹ Even in cases where migrants spent a long time abroad, there was frequently an assumption on the part of officials or the migrants themselves that they would return 'home'.

Americo-Liberian settlers, on the other hand, followed a different pattern. Those involved in early 'Back to Africa' movements pioneered by African Americans in Sierra Leone and Liberia, Afro-Caribbean settlers in Sierra Leone, and Brazilians and Cubans in Lagos were more likely to travel with their families and remain permanently in their new settlements.³² In addition, many frequently explicitly expressed a desire to transplant their 'civilizations', religions, and modernities as well. Movement in the African diaspora was not just about escaping slavery, finding employment, and seeking new opportunities – what are usually termed 'push' factors in migration. It was sometimes also motivated by a desire to share ideology and values, and to spread 'civilization' – what are usually termed 'pull' factors. In other words, African Americans sometimes chose to migrate or participate in colonization schemes for reasons that were very similar to those of American settlers in the West, or Portuguese, Spanish, British, and French settlers in their empires.

There was, in fact, in the early period of colonization, a surprising American nationalism associated with both the colonization and the migration plans. African Americans were responding to the desire (to paraphrase) to 'build America o'er the foam', just as British emigrants were motivated by building the British empire.³³ Despite the unequal religious,

27 Diane Frost, 'Diasporan West African communities: the Kru in Freetown & Liverpool', *Review of African Political Economy*, 29, 92, 2002, p. 289; G. E. Brooks, Jr, *The Kru mariner in the nineteenth century: an historical compendium*, Newark, DE: Liberian Studies Association in America, 1972.

28 Jane Martin, 'Krumen "down the coast": Liberian migrants on the West African coast in the 19th and early 20th centuries', *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 18, 3, 1985, p. 406.

29 *Ibid.*, p. 403.

30 Magee and Thompson, *Empire and globalisation*, pp. 64, 66: 'It is estimated that, from 1860 to 1914, as many as 40 per cent of all English emigrants came back to Britain'.

31 Robert Bickers, 'Introduction: Britains and Britons over the seas', in Robert Bickers, ed., *Settlers and expatriates: Britons over the seas*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010, p. 1.

32 Lindsay, 'Brazilian immigrants', pp. 27–8.

33 Magee and Thompson, *Empire and globalisation*, p. 75.

civil, economic, and political opportunities facing these emigrants in America, they were nonetheless committed in some sense to the American project. In expanding overseas, Liberian settlers were carrying the American civilization project abroad. Modernity and American identity were tied to a number of ideological and material factors for these emigrants. Agriculture (democratic yeomanry) and Christianity, as well as material culture – ranging from clothing, through books and houses, to city planning – were all bound together. Liberians used these aspects as signifiers in writing back to America in order to identify their work in the colony as creating a convincing middle-class alternative abroad. Like other settlers before them, Americo-Liberians celebrated Liberia as ‘more American than America’, since only in Africa could the African descendant practise unfettered Christianity, participate in democracy, own his land, and engage in modern life. While Lamin Sanneh has written that ‘the colony had America in its eyes while it turned its back on Africa; though it was necessarily in Africa, it was preferably not of it’, the actual negotiation of American identities abroad was more complex and contingent.³⁴ In their communications, the Americo-Liberians presented themselves as a convincing middle class, not necessarily rejecting Africa but trying to incorporate their African experience into a broader national story that cast America as a beacon of democracy, modernity, Christianity, and civilization to other parts of the world. Settlers wrote home in terms that could be understood by Americans, trying to link their former and present lives. This was an important message for the Liberians to send because, even in the beginning, Liberia’s ‘pull’ factors were limited by the negative interactions between settlers and indigenous Liberians.

‘The advantages we will have in Africa’

Particularly beginning around 1810 with what Ira Berlin has termed the ‘migration generations’, westward migration – especially to the New South states along the Mississippi – among the enslaved was associated with the expanding cotton economy, and led to fear of forced removal from family and community through the inland slave trade.³⁵ Berlin describes the ‘transformation of the seaboard South into a slave-exporting region’, with Delaware, Maryland, Virginia, North Carolina, Kentucky, and South Carolina as the main exporters to the new plantations in Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana.³⁶ Between 1810 and 1820, 124,000 slaves were sold from the Chesapeake region to Kentucky, Tennessee, Georgia, Mississippi, Alabama, Louisiana, Arkansas, and Missouri, with an additional

34 Lamin Sanneh, *Abolitionists abroad: American blacks and the making of modern West Africa*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999, p. 15.

35 Michael Tadmán, *Speculators and slaves: masters, traders, and slaves in the old south*, Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989, pp. 6–7; Alan Kulikoff, ‘Uprooted peoples: black migrants in the age of the American revolution, 1790–1820’, in Ira Berlin and Benjamin Hoffman, eds., *Slavery and freedom in the age of the American revolution*, Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 1983, p. 152; Burin, *Slavery*, p. 61; Walter Johnson, *Soul by soul: life inside the antebellum slave market*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004, ch. 7; Herman Freudenberger and Jonathan B. Pritchett, ‘The domestic United States slave trade: new evidence’, *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 21, 3, 1991, pp. 447–77.

36 Ira Berlin, *Generations of captivity*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003, p. 214.

13,000 sent from the North Carolina Low Country.³⁷ The internal slave trade from the Old South to the newer frontier settlements in Missouri, Mississippi, Alabama, Louisiana, and Texas depended on the sale of surplus slave labour from the Old South, where the adoption of mixed farming had weakened demand for a year-round plantation labour force.³⁸

Because many of the new plantations in the south-west were exclusively focused on the production of sugar and cotton, the internal trade tended to concentrate on young slaves, between the ages of ten and fifteen.³⁹ Unlike the local trade, where families tended to be sold to at least neighbouring plantations, roughly 23% of the interregional trade was made up of children sold away from their parents.⁴⁰ Berlin reports that 'sales to the interior shattered approximately one slave marriage in three and separated one fifth of all children under fourteen from one or both of their parents'.⁴¹ Numerous fugitive slave narratives pointed to this threat by masters as a motivation for fleeing north. For instance, George Johnson, who escaped to Canada from Harper's Ferry, Virginia, explained that 'Some were sold from my master's farm, and many from the neighborhood. If a man did any thing out of the way, he was in more danger of being sold than of being whipped. The slaves were always afraid of being sold South.'⁴² Not all were able to escape in time, as was the case with Phebe Brownrigg, who was to leave North Carolina for Mississippi. She wrote to her daughter in 1835 that 'I have for some time had hope of seeing you once more in this world, but now that hope is gone forever. I expect to start next month for ... the Mississippi river.'⁴³

The separation of families in this trade was in stark contrast to the family cohesion present in the Liberian emigrations, creating a 'push' factor favouring emigration. Given the uncertainty facing enslaved families, as Burin notes, 'emigration to Liberia might have represented their best chance at keeping their families intact'.⁴⁴ Many of those who immigrated to Liberia as manumitted or recently emancipated slaves travelled with husbands, wives, children, and even elderly parents. Burin notes that 'approximately 25 percent of the time, when a group of emigrants left a Southern county, the party consisted of some combination of free blacks, manumitted, or "purchased" emigrants. In such cases, the party's members were often related by blood or marriage'.⁴⁵ Frequently, the group was a combination of slave families manumitted from the same plantation and

37 Kulikoff, 'Uprooted peoples', p. 152; Philip Troutman puts the total number of forced migrations between 1790 and 1860 at 1.1 million, or 'more than twice the number of Africans carried to mainland North America in the previous century' (Troutman, 'Grapevine', pp. 203–4).

38 Fields, *Slavery and freedom*, p. 5.

39 Tadman, *Speculators and slaves*, p. 141.

40 *Ibid.*, 151.

41 Berlin, *Generations of captivity*, p. 213.

42 George Johnson from Harper's Ferry, in Benjamin Drew, *A north-side view of slavery: the refugee; or the narratives of fugitive slaves in Canada related by themselves*, Boston: J.P. Jewett and Company, 1856, p. 52.

43 Quoted in Tadman, *Speculators and slaves*, p. 156.

44 Burin, *Slavery*, p. 78; Calvin Schermerhorn, 'The everyday life of enslaved people in the antebellum south', *OAH Magazine of History*, 23, 2, 2009, pp. 31–2.

45 Burin, *Slavery*, pp. 74–5.

‘conjunctive’ manumissions, in which the ACS or the enslaved emigrants themselves negotiated for the manumission of family members on neighbouring plantations.⁴⁶

Given the typical age of sale away from the family, it is unsurprising that many who chose African emigration had teenage or young adult children who accompanied them. Peyton Skipwith, manumitted from Virginia, emigrated with his wife and six young children. James Minor, who was twenty years old by the time he was manumitted, travelled with his mother. The Pages of Virginia were a large extended family with a number of young nieces and nephews.⁴⁷ Even those who did experience separations from loved ones through their emigration found themselves in better circumstances than those sold south. Galloway Smith McDonogh, for instance, wrote to his former owner, John McDonogh, to explain that he wished his respects to be paid to ‘Fanny’, whom he had married but had not told McDonogh about. He was unhappy that his wife was not with him in Liberia, but he was able to write to McDonogh requesting that, ‘if you ever have a chance to do so’ his wife, Fanny, might be sent out to join him.⁴⁸ Though separated, their situation was more hopeful than was that of those unfortunate couples split by sale.

Another factor pushing former slaves to choose emigration over resettlement in another part of the US was the lack of connection to America felt by some former slaves and the sense that the land elsewhere promised more. Kimberly K. Smith points out,

To the extent that law and social practices (along with slave culture itself) reinforced the idea that slaves were aliens to the American community, they created conditions unfavourable to developing a sense of connection to the land over which that community claimed authority. Thus for slaves, the process of forming an emotional bond to the land and developing a sense of identity that was connected to the immediate landscape must have been quite different than it was for free persons (especially free white persons).⁴⁹

In contrast, settlers in Liberia wrote back to America about their ‘fifteen or twenty acres of land cleared and planted in Potatoes, cassadoes, arrow root, corn and about two hundred bushes and about six or seven hundred coffee plants’, or told how they ‘have just drawn our five acre lots & are pleased with their situation & soil’.⁵⁰ Even those who complained bitterly of the situation in the country often included statements indicating that Africa ‘is thar [*sic*] home’ and stated with pride that ‘I have got my farm partly cleared down’.⁵¹

46 *Ibid.*, pp. 75–6. Burin explains that ‘On seventy-nine separate occasions, multiple slaveholders freed bondpersons at the same time and in the same county. Most of these conjunctive emancipations involved just two slaveholders, though there were several cases wherein five or more took part. All totalled, 221 manumitters (that is, 39 percent of all manumitters) participated in conjunctive emancipations.’

47 Wiley, *Slaves no more*, pp. 13, 100.

48 *Ibid.*, Galloway Smith McDonogh to John McDonogh, 1 July 1842.

49 Kimberly K. Smith, *African American environmental thought*, Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2007, p. 24.

50 Wiley, *Slaves no more*, George R. Ellis McDonogh to John McDonogh, 14 April 1844; Jacob Gibson to John H. Latrobe and William McKenney, 31 August 1833.

51 *Ibid.*, Alexander Hance to William McKenney, 30 August 1835; Paul F. Lansay to John H. B. Latrobe, 16 January 1839.

Dissociation from the American environment was a 'push' factor but was also related to an important 'pull' factor – a feeling that the home for African Americans must be elsewhere, including particularly Africa or Haiti, where utopian plans were already at work.⁵² Many participated in the Haitian emigration movement, contributing to the seven to ten thousand African Americans who settled in the black republic.⁵³ Despite the risks of malaria, yellow fever, and political instability in both of these locations, colonists leaving for both Haiti and Liberia expressed interest in living, as the Reverend George McGill wrote to Moses Sheppard of Baltimore, where 'we all here are free; nor do we shudder at the sight of a white man. We labor under no embarrassments on account of our colour. The black face out-shines the white.'⁵⁴ The schemes shared a high regard for locations where people of African descent were given political power. The future Liberian president Edwin J. Roys and John Brown Russwurm both praised Haiti and intended to move there before choosing Liberia. Despite the early popularity of Haiti, however, a number of emigrants expressed their disdain for any emigration plan that did not see Africa as the land to which African Americans were connected. James C. Minor of Virginia wrote to his former master, John Minor, praising him for liberating his family and declaring that 'Africa is a land of freedom. Where else can the man of color enjoy temporal freedom but in Africa? They may flee to Hayti [*sic*] or to Canada, but it will not do.'⁵⁵ Abraham Blackford, also manumitted from Virginia, wrote to Mary Blackford that 'Africa is the very country for the colored man.'⁵⁶

Those who favoured Africa for colonization were in good company. Brazilian, Cuban, British, West Indian, French, Portuguese, and Dutch settlers were streaming into the continent in this period. As Lisa Lindsay writes, 'Between 1820 and 1866 ... over 700 passports were issued to Africans sailing from Bahia, the greatest numbers in 1835 (422), 1836 (319), and 1858 (119)'.⁵⁷ The (North and South) Americans who chose to settle in Liberia, Freetown, Lagos, Cape Coast, Porto Novo, and even Libreville 'brought with them ... new ideas about ethnicity that had been forged abroad and new religious institutions and practices, both Catholic and Muslim' as well as Protestant.⁵⁸

For the Protestant Americans who settled in Liberia, part of their view of Africa as the 'homeland' was tied up with the Christian mission. In the US, African American preachers, particularly in the South, were subject to severe restrictions on what, when, where, and to whom they could preach.⁵⁹ The settler Samson Ceasar of Virginia, for example, wrote

52 See Christopher Fyfe, *A history of Sierra Leone*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962; John Peterson, *Province of freedom: a history of Sierra Leone, 1787–1870*, London: Faber and Faber, 1969.

53 Hunt, *Haiti's influence*, 170.

54 'News from Africa': a collection of facts, relating to the colony in Liberia, for the information of the free people of colour in Maryland, Baltimore, MD: J.D. Toy, 1832, p. 1.

55 Wiley, *Slaves no more*, James C. Minor to John Minor, 11 February 1833.

56 *Ibid.*, Abraham Blackford to Mary B. Blackford, 14 February 1846.

57 Lindsay, 'Brazilian immigrants', pp. 24–5; Monday B. Abasiattai, 'The search for independence: new world blacks in Sierra Leone and Liberia, 1787–1847', *Journal of Black Studies*, 23, 1, 1992, pp. 107–16.

58 Kristin Mann, 'Shifting paradigms in the study of the African diaspora and of Atlantic history and culture', *Slavery & Abolition*, 22, 1, 2001, p. 10.

59 Sanneh, *Abolitionists abroad*, pp. 74–6.

back to his former master that he hoped to serve God in the new colony because, back in America, 'the people in Buchannon Stood in my way in trying to Serve god'.⁶⁰ As one Maryland abolitionist wrote, 'in this State it is expressly in violation of the Law for the coloured people to hold public meetings unless conducted by a Learned white preacher'.⁶¹

Freed from the furtive brand of Christianity that they knew in America, settlers from the slave states were enthusiastic in soliciting more emigrants seeking religious freedom. In a letter to the Maryland Free People of Color, Liberians wrote 'We have all that is meant by liberty of conscience', suggesting a freedom to create religious, political, and social identity free from a master's restrictions or a state's laws.⁶² As new groups of colonists arrived in Liberia, 'Liberty of conscience' was repeatedly asserted by new Liberians to their former compatriots as one of the benefits of African colonization: unlike their American counterparts, they were not restricted from church membership by strict masters, recognition by white church officials, or segregation and prejudice.⁶³ They convinced James Eden, of the 'Free Persons of Colour in Charleston, South Carolina', who stated that 'The sacrifices that will be made here, are not worth a thought, when compared with the advantages we will have in Africa. There we and our children will enjoy every privilege, as well as civil and religious liberty.'⁶⁴

Generally, those who were inclined to expanding Christianity and American 'civilization' seemed to be more interested in extraterritorial migrations to 'heathen' Africa and Haiti than in internal migration.⁶⁵ James Theodore Holly immigrated to Haiti in order to establish an Episcopal church for American emigrants, as well as for Haitians who practised Catholicism or voodoo. Sierra Leone, one potential site for emigration, brought together the anti-slavery movement and the global missionary movement, and offered a sense of providential atonement or opportunity for new missionaries.⁶⁶ The emphasis on Christian mission was overwhelming among Liberian colonists. Many freed African Americans who settled in Monrovia were keenly aware of a popular understanding of slavery as the painful means through which God brought his promised people to his Word. Some Liberian settlers thus saw their return to Africa as the completion of the mission of bringing Christianity to their

60 Electronic Text Center, University of Virginia Liberian letters (henceforth UVA), Samson Ceasar to Henry F. Westfall, 2 June 1834.

61 HSP, (Phi) 490, Series II, Letter to the Pennsylvania Abolition Society, 20 March 1834.

62 'News from Africa', pp. 16–17.

63 'Extracts from an address of the colonists to the free people of colour in the United States', in Thomas Hodgkin, *On negro emancipation and American colonization*, London, 1832.

64 'Sentiments of the free persons of colour in Charleston, S.C.' in 'News from Africa', p. 24.

65 This unnamed Philadelphian, in her letter to the *Liberator*, did also point out that in emigrating to (Catholic) Mexico 'we can take with us the Holy Bible, which is able to make us wise unto salvation; and perhaps we may be made the honored instruments in the hands of an all-wise God, in establishing the holy religion of the Protestant Church in that country.'

66 Boyd Hilton, *The age of atonement: the influence of evangelicalism on social and economic thought, 1795–1865*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988; Andrew N. Porter, *Religion versus empire? British protestant missionaries and overseas expansion, 1700–1914*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004, pp. 45–53; David Brion Davis, 'Exiles, exodus, and promised lands', Tanner Lectures on Human Values, delivered at Stanford University, 22–3 February 2006, http://www.tannerlectures.utah.edu/lectures/documents/Davis_2007.pdf (consulted 7 November 2011).

people. A Liberian wrote to his former mistress that ‘many of the recaptured Africans come to be baptized, and we expect more shortly; they appear to be more diligent than the Americans’.⁶⁷ Many of these recaptured Africans were brought from the Congo region, and could have already been Catholic, so their conversion to one of the Protestant denominations in Liberia may have been less momentous than the settlers realized as they tried to bring Christianity to the ‘heathens’. Peyton Skipwith wrote to his mother that ‘I believ [*sic*] I shall have more help in this dark benighted land, to try and civilize the heathens and bring them to know life and life eternal.’⁶⁸

The appeal of the Christian mission and accompanying American ‘civilization’ also extended to northern states. John Brown Russwurm, for example, a graduate of Maine’s Bowdoin College and co-editor of *Freedom’s Journal* with the staunch anti-colonizationist Samuel Cornish, ultimately came around to the cause of colonization, arguing that ‘full citizenship in the United States is utterly impossible in the nature of things, and that those who pant for it must cast their eyes elsewhere’.⁶⁹ For him, colonization was the only way to help spread Christianity and civilization in West Africa.⁷⁰ He left America in 1829 for Liberia, where he established the *Liberia Herald* and participated in the ACS’s ‘missions to bring Christianity to the heathens of Africa’.⁷¹

The emphasis on Christian mission among Liberian settlers caused some criticism from those opposed to African colonization. In the late 1830s and 1840s, relying on testimony from ACS literature, a group of black ministers in America emphasized the disease, war, and moral corruption likely to befall colonists in Liberia. The ministers were wary of the susceptibility of ‘their own morals, and those of their children, to the influences and temptations of the most treacherous and sin-sunken heathen that live, and of the demons called *Christians*, by whose teaching and example these same heathen have been raised to their eminence in vice and crime’.⁷² Two New Yorkers, Samuel Cornish and Theodore Wright, wrote in their letter *The colonization scheme considered in its rejection by the colored people*,

that Christian colonization has either uniformly wrought the extermination of the aborigines, or that it *tends* to do so, except where the Colonists themselves lapse into barbarism – as was the case with the Portuguese settlements on the Western coast

67 Samuel Wilkeson, *A concise history of the commencement, progress, and present condition of the American colonies of Liberia*, Washington, DC, 1839, p. 51. Although the colony was founded with money for the ‘recaptured’ slaves to resettle, and between 1827 and 1830 240 captives were resettled, by 1835 only 37 more had been sent, and by 1839 only 9 more: *Tables showing the number of emigrants and recaptured Africans sent to the colony of Liberia by the government of the United States*, Washington, DC, 1845.

68 Randall Miller, ed., ‘*Dear master*’: *letters of a slave family*, Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1990, Peyton Skipwith to John Hartwell Cocke, 27 June 1846.

69 Sanneh, *Abolitionists abroad*, p. 221.

70 Amos J. Beyan, *African American settlements in West Africa: John Brown Russwurm and the American civilizing efforts*, New York: Palgrave, 2005, p. 29; Sidbury, *Becoming African*, pp. 198–9.

71 Sidbury, *Becoming African*, p. 177.

72 Samuel Cornish and Theodore Wright, *The colonization scheme considered in its rejection by the colored people*, Newark, NJ: Aaron Guest, 1840, p. 6.

of Africa – has not unfrequently been adduced, to prove the ill success that will *probably* attend all similar efforts for the Christianization of the heathen.⁷³

By those ‘Portuguese settlements on the Western coast of Africa’ where the ‘Colonists themselves lapse into barbarism’, Cornish and Wright were referring to Portuguese settlers and traders in colonies such as Angola and Guinea Bissau (as well as Lagos) who had intermarried with the indigenous populations and become integrated into hybrid local political structures.⁷⁴ The aborigines alluded to in their pamphlet may have been the Cherokee, the most recent of a series of Native American groups to have been stripped of their land and forcibly resettled. This linking of ‘Indian removal’ and Christian mission was not only made by opponents of Liberian colonization. Both ACS and ‘Indian removal’ literature articulated the preservation of racial unity, the civilizing benefits of separation, and the possibilities for Christian mission both among those being resettled and in the newly colonized territories.⁷⁵ This association of Christianization and the civilizing mission with Indian removal may have further reduced enthusiasm among those already disinclined towards the Liberian scheme because of its growing reputation as a replicator of the Southern plantocracy in Africa.

Liberia’s settler society

The effects of Nat Turner’s rebellion in 1831 acted as a new spur to free emigration from the Old South. Between 1820 and 1860, out of a total of 4,095 free emigrants to Liberia from the US, 328 were from Maryland, 621 from North Carolina, 349 from South Carolina, and 1,230 from Virginia.⁷⁶ While the upsurge in emigrants in the aftermath of the rebellion proved to be temporary, the overall trend was not.

Occasionally settlers married into elite indigenous families, but the roughly equal balance of male and female arrivals from America led to the creation of an endogamous settler society. The wealth and high status of some of these free emigrants increased their sense of superiority over and alienation from their new African surroundings.⁷⁷ This caused tension between the newly arriving settlers and the local African communities, particularly the Kru, who were often taken on as labourers in both Liberia and in neighbouring Sierra Leone. This unequal relationship created a sense of disconnect between American and Liberian black experience as the formerly oppressed looked to their institutions to recreate the superior/inferior relationship that existed in America, with themselves now in the superior position. Settlers and recaptives alike replicated many of the exclusive fraternal

73 *Ibid.*, p. 13, emphasis in original. Cornish did, however, participate in the ‘Society for Haiti’, which cooperated with the ACS. Hunt, *Haiti’s influence*, p. 168.

74 For more on other West African Portuguese creole societies, see Philip Havik, *Creole societies in the Portuguese colonial empire*, *Lusophone Studies* 6, July 2007, pp. 41–63 and 127–153.

75 See Nicholas Guyatt, “‘The outskirts of our happiness’: race and the lure of colonization in the early republic”, *Journal of American History*, 95, 4, 2009, pp. 986–1011.

76 Burin, *Slavery*, tables.

77 LCP, Tom Schick, ‘The 1843 Liberian census: an analysis of settler society before independence’.

organizations and societies of the American South, and emphasized the importance of cultivating land in plantation-style farming.⁷⁸

Many settlers expressed shock that they could be related to the Africans whom they encountered upon arrival in Liberia. Peyton Skipwith wrote that 'it is something strange to think that those people of Africa are called our ancestors'.⁷⁹ Samson Ceasar also commented that 'when I first Saw the natives [all] naked I though [*sic*] that I never could get ust [*sic*] to it' but acknowledged that 'it is an old saing [*sic*] use is second nature I do not mind to see them now'.⁸⁰ Even the so-called 'Congos' responded to this 'civilizing' class structure: a recaptive originally from the Congo region claimed that he would rather stay in Liberia than return to his homeland because he could not be made a slave in Liberia and instead was regarded as a 'white man', for 'the emigrants are called *white* by the natives on the coast; they appear to think the word denotes intelligence'.⁸¹

Poor settlers were increasingly squeezed out of the labour force, however, and it was difficult for uneducated former slaves to earn the money that they needed to advance in society through unskilled manual labour.⁸² While the successful establishment of farms in Liberia was heralded by many settlers and the ACS, Peyton Skipwith reported to his former master, John Hartwell Cocke, that work was very difficult to come by because the colonists engaged in trade and plantation agriculture employed 'apprenticed' indigenous labour (he reported that they were 'Slavs').⁸³ One unlucky settler 'has never drawn any land' even though the ACS agent was supposed to distribute lots to arriving settlers.⁸⁴ Given the important connection between freedom and ownership of land, this must have been a particularly frustrating grievance.⁸⁵

Meanwhile, other settlers were growing in wealth and power. Thomas Brown reported that on arrival to the colony he was greeted warmly by the 'first families' but 'It was well known we had property, and we afterwards found this was the reason of our being so

78 S. C. Saha, 'Transference of American values through agriculture to Liberia: a review of Liberian agriculture during the nineteenth century', *Journal of Negro History*, 72, 3/4, 1987, pp. 58–60; Bruce L. Mouser, 'The Baltimore/Pongo connection: American entrepreneurship, colonial expansionism, or African opportunism?', *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 33, 2, 2000, pp. 313–33; M. B. Akpan, 'Black imperialism: Americo-Liberian rule over the African peoples of Liberia, 1841–1964', *Canadian Journal of African Studies/Revue Canadienne des Études Africaines*, 7, 2, 1973, pp. 218–19; Mouser, 'Landlords-strangers: a process of accommodation and assimilation', *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 8, 3, 1975, pp. 425–40; John Hargreaves, 'African colonization in the nineteenth century: Liberia and Sierra Leone', in Jeffrey Butler, ed., *Boston University Papers in African History*, vol. 1, Boston, MA: Boston University Press, 1964, p. 73.

79 Miller, 'Dear master', Peyton Skipwith, 22 April 1840.

80 UVA, Samson Ceasar to Henry Westfall, 1 April 1834.

81 *African colonization – slave trade – commerce, report of Mr. Kennedy, of Maryland, from the committee on commerce of the House of Representatives of the United States*, Washington, DC, 1843, p. 823.

82 *Ibid.*

83 Miller, 'Dear master', Peyton Skipwith to John Hartwell Cocke, 10 February 1834.

84 Kentucky Special Collections, Wickliffe-Preston Family Papers, Box 39, 20 September 1835, G. W. McElroy to Mary Owen Todd Russell Wickliffe, for Lucy Russell, <http://www.bluegrass.kctcs.edu/LCC/HIS/scraps/liberia.html> (consulted 7 November 2011).

85 Smith, *African American environmental thought*, p. 19.

well received at first.⁸⁶ These settlers, most of whom had been free emigrants, looked down on uneducated or ‘undesirable’ emigrants, saw them as a burden on the struggling country, and discouraged their emigration, replicating the practice of a number of emerging settler societies at this time, and reinforcing the class dimensions developing in the American Republic as well. Denoon writes that ‘In Chile and Argentina, decisions about the national origins of immigrants were consciously made by the state in response to the expressed interests of ruling classes: when the optimum quality of immigrant was not available by market mechanisms, sponsored migrant schemes were established to remedy the defect’, while in Australia there was a ‘determination of the working class to admit only such workers ... as would not threaten prevailing living standards’.⁸⁷ In Liberia, Samson Ceasar wrote to Henry Westfall in Virginia complaining that ‘I must Say that I am afraid that our Country never will improve as it [ought] untill [*sic*] the people in the United States keep their Slaves that they have raised like as dum [*sic*] as horses at home and Send those here who will be A help to improve the Country.’⁸⁸

Like other creole and settler elites along the west coast of Africa, Liberia’s wealthy, high-powered settlers tried to portray themselves as promoting civilized life and Christian morality in order to demonstrate that they were both able and willing to run their own country and see it prosper.⁸⁹ Settlers and creoles in Sierra Leone, the Gambia, Cape Coast, and ultimately modern Nigeria were able to frame their appeals in ways that demonstrated their middle class, bourgeois values – anti-slavery sentiment, Christian mission, commercial acumen – to the metropolitan government in Britain. For those back home in the US, however, on the receiving end of these letters and newspaper articles, Liberia looked increasingly to be replicating the social order of Southern plantation society and its particular virtues and vices.⁹⁰ These included a close-knit social structure, dependence on cheap (or free) labour, a burgeoning plantation economy, and the creation of a material world that resembled the American material culture they had left behind.

The Liberian state was often at war with its neighbours as it attempted to impose a deliberately American civilization on a decidedly African milieu. Liberian settlers frequently found themselves in pitched battles with neighbours who were dissatisfied with land purchase arrangements or who objected to the new oppressive laws – including anti-slave-trade

86 HSP, *Examination of Thomas C. Brown*.

87 Donald Denoon, ‘Understanding settler societies’, *Historical Studies*, 18, 73, 1979, pp. 520, 522.

88 UVA, Samson Ceasar to Henry F. Westfall, 2 June 1834.

89 For more the other settlements along the coast, see Kristin Mann, *Slavery and the birth of an African city: Lagos, 1760–1900*, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2007; Kristin Mann, ‘The dangers of dependence: Christian marriage among elite women in Lagos colony, 1880–1915’, *Journal of African History*, 24, 1, 1983, pp. 37–56; J.T. Lever, ‘Mulatto influence on the Gold Coast in the early nineteenth century: Jan Neiser of Elmina’, *African Historical Studies*, 3, 2, 1970, pp. 253–261; Margaret Priestley, *West African trade and coast society: a family study*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969, pp. 121–127. For more on this comparison, see Bronwen Everill, ‘British West Africa or the “United States of Africa”? Imperial tensions in the transatlantic anti-slavery movement, 1838–1842’, *Journal of Transatlantic Studies*, 11, 2, 2011, pp. 136–150.

90 Carl Patrick Burrowes, ‘Black Christian republicanism: a southern ideology in early Liberia, 1822 to 1847’, *Journal of Negro History*, 86, 1, 2001, pp. 30–44. Burrowes argues that the development of a coherent African American worldview in the South helped advance colonization and shaped Liberian society.

treaties – under which they found themselves living. In 1839, a man named Getumbe (often written Gatoomba, Gah-toom-bah, or Gay Toombay), of Vai and Gola parentage, planned an attack on Millsburg, a settlement in the interior along the St Paul's River.⁹¹ This was forestalled by Liberia's Governor Buchanan, who called up the colonial militia and destroyed Getumbe's town, Suen, five miles north of Millsburg. The result of the destruction of Suen was an increase in the perceived strength of the colony, with the kings Brister, Bromley, Peter, Willey, and Mama Ketzie of the Dei signing a treaty declaring that 'neither shelter nor protection shall be given to Gay Toombay, who is now at war with the Colony'.⁹²

Despite the treaty, Getembe's alliance with Gotola and the Condo resulted in threats to the colony's settlements in Millsburg and Heddington in 1840. Sion Harris, a settler in Heddington, wrote to Samuel Wilkeson of the ACS describing the battle. His narrative reveals the isolated nature of some of these settlements, the confusion about the enemies with whom the settlers were currently at war, and the settlers' attitudes towards the sporadic warfare with their indigenous neighbours. Harris wrote that 'after various threatening from Goterah & Gatoomba the town of Heddington was attacked by 3 or 4 hundred warriors Composed of Botswains, Mambo, Veys & Deys, headed by Goterah and 4 other warriors'.⁹³ Harris was successful in leading the townspeople in an impromptu defence of the town, and even took credit for killing the Loma leader, Gotola. He described the confrontation with Gotola, who appeared 'shaking, growling, bellowing, calling his men to come up, [claiming] the town was his'.⁹⁴ These frequent wars created a frontier foundation myth for the settlers similar to those created by military engagements taking place in other parts of settler society in Africa.⁹⁵ But they also led some Liberian settlers to migrate further afield: in 1841, the governor of Sierra Leone reported that 'a deputation from Liberia had arrived at the Gold Coast offering on the part of fifteen hundred citizens of Liberia, to emigrate and settle there'.⁹⁶ Other Liberians asked to be allowed to move into Freetown.

Westward migration as an alternative

Persistent rumours that the Liberian settlers had embraced domestic and plantation slavery, cultivated Southern values, and engaged in wars with the indigenous population acted as a wedge between the emigrants and potential colonists back in America. However, even those who spurned African colonization were not necessarily immune to American expansionist ideology. Reverend Richard Allen, Bishop of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, stated that 'this land which we have watered with our *tears* and *our blood*, is now our

91 Svend Holsoe, 'A study of relations between settlers and indigenous peoples in western Liberia, 1821–1847', *African Historical Studies*, 4, 2, 1971, p. 350.

92 *African Repository*, 16, 1840, pp. 215–16.

93 Wiley, *Slaves no more*, Sion Harris to Samuel Wilkeson, 16 April 1840.

94 *Ibid.*

95 Kenneth Good, 'Settler colonialism: economic development and class formation', *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 14, 1976, pp. 599–600.

96 The National Archives UK, CO 267/166, Fergusson to Russell, 8 October 1841.

mother country, and we are well satisfied to stay where wisdom abounds and the gospel is free'.⁹⁷ Condemning those who had already chosen to emigrate, David Walker wrote in his *Appeal* that, 'what our brethren could have been thinking about, who have left their native land and home and gone away to Africa, I am unable to say. This country is as much ours as it is the whites, whether they will admit it now or not, they will see and believe it by and by'.⁹⁸ If the country was as much theirs, then so was the right to migrate to the western territories and Canada, where 'these experimental communities represent a deep-rooted aspiration of black Americans to the property ownership, independence, and equality enjoyed by other American farmers'.⁹⁹ This is clear in the movement of a number of African Americans to settle the communities of Cass County, Michigan; Hamilton County, Indiana; Cincinnati, Ohio; and Wilberforce in Upper Canada (Canada West) in the 1820s and 1830s.¹⁰⁰ Westward migrants to Cincinnati, for instance, were attracted by growing employment opportunities and the lure of freedom, while many emigrated to Canada because 'African Americans were entitled to every benefit of citizenship, including suffrage'.¹⁰¹

This desire to move west may have derived from both the Northwest Ordinance's anti-slavery provisions and what Jane Merritt describes as an eighteenth-century image of the imperial frontier as a neutral 'middle ground' territory, ripe for Utopian possibilities for (in the nineteenth century) both black and white settlers.¹⁰² Before the articulation of the 'Manifest Destiny' doctrine by John O'Sullivan, an intellectual history of American expansion had long been established, notably by the forefather of the colonizationists, Thomas Jefferson. Jefferson held that 'colonialism was contrary to the genius of American institutions' because he believed that white Americans would eventually spread across the continent.¹⁰³ Despite the racial theme of Jefferson's beliefs, echoed by later slaveholding expansionists, and despite differing motivations, westward migration was clearly a shared aspiration of Americans from all racial backgrounds, as the development of 'black agrarian' ideology demonstrated. Since 'Democratic agrarians' central claim was that owning a farm and cultivating it through one's own labor creates a character ideally suited to republican government', a 'black agrarian' ideology also developed, in conjunction with free soil and free labour ideology, positing that black Americans could participate equally in the agrarian democracy, but that slaveholding was corrosive to the Republican ideal.¹⁰⁴ Free and freed

97 Richard Allen, Bishop of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, US, quoted in Walker, *Walker's appeal*, pp. 59–60, emphasis in original.

98 *Ibid.*, p. 58.

99 Smith, *African American environmental thought*, p. 39.

100 See Nikki Taylor, *Frontiers of freedom: Cincinnati's black community, 1802–1868*, Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2005; Stephen A. Vincent, *Southern seed, northern soil: African-American farm communities in the midwest, 1765–1900*, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1999.

101 Taylor, "'Forced" exodus', p. 289.

102 Jane T. Merritt, *At the crossroads: Indians and empires on a Mid-Atlantic frontier, 1700–1763*, Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2003, p. 22.

103 Frederick Merk, *Manifest destiny and mission in American history*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1963, p. 8.

104 Smith, *African American environmental thought*, pp. 43–4, 67.

African Americans who emigrated to the West frequently took up farming and set up self-governing towns or villages, echoing the 'black agrarianism' argument that the cultivation of the land led to strong and responsible republican government.¹⁰⁵

Many of those who supported North American migration vocally condemned extraterritorial emigration, but still supported transnational migration of a sort. In 1831, the American Society of Free Persons of Color published its constitution. Delegates from Pennsylvania, New York, Connecticut, Rhode Island, Maryland, Delaware, Virginia, New Jersey, and Ohio declared their purpose of 'improving their condition in the United States; for purchasing lands; and for the establishment of a settlement in the Province of Upper Canada'.¹⁰⁶ Citing recent violent incidents in Ohio, the convention received delegates who had been sent with the purpose 'to consider the propriety of forming a settlement in the province of Upper Canada, in order to afford a place of refuge to those who may be obliged to leave their homes, as well as to others inclined to emigrate with the view of improving their condition'.¹⁰⁷ At the same convention, black leaders derided the ACS and its young settlements in Liberia. Similarly, while Walker argued against Liberian colonization, popularizing the belief among some African Americans that the plan was intended to remove the influence of free blacks on the enslaved population, he also proposed westward migration or Canadian emigration for those fleeing enslavement.¹⁰⁸ The unnamed author of a letter to the *Liberator* commented that she was 'happy to learn that the sentiments of some of my Trenton brethren are in accordance with my own, in regard to our locating in Mexico and Upper Canada'.¹⁰⁹

A group of Bostonians, led by Robert Roberts, wrote of colonization in Garrison's *Thoughts on African colonization* that 'again we object, on the ground of there being sufficient land in the United States, on which a colony might be established that would better meet the wishes of the colored people, and at a much cheaper rate than could possibly be done by sending them to a howling wilderness far away'.¹¹⁰ Their objection was not to colonization itself, since they thought that a colony within the territory of America would be acceptable. The unnamed Philadelphian articulated the difference for her:

I would not wish to be thought pleading the cause of colonization, for no one detests it more than I do. I would not be taken to Africa, were the Society to make me queen of the country; and were I to move to Canada, I would not settle in the colony, but take up my abode in some of the cities where a distinction is not known; for I do not approve of our drawing off into a separate body anywhere. But, I confess, I can see no just reason why we should not cultivate the spirit of enterprise as well as the

105 See, for instance, Taylor, "'Forced" exodus'; Drew, *North-side view*; Robin W. Winks, *The blacks in Canada: a history*, Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1997, p. 142.

106 *Constitution of the American society of free persons of color and an address*, Philadelphia, PA, 1831, p. 5.

107 *Ibid.*, p. 9.

108 Walker, *Walker's appeal*, p. vii.

109 *Liberator*, 28 January 1832, p. 14.

110 Robert Roberts and the colored citizens of Boston, 12 March 1831, quoted by William Lloyd Garrison, *Thoughts on African colonization*, Boston: Garrison and Knapp, 1832, p. 20.

whites. They are found in every quarter of the globe, in search of situations to better their condition.¹¹¹

It is clear, therefore, that some Northern African Americans were still interested in westward migration, which was perceived differently from extraterritorial emigration because of the historical and rhetorical relationship of Americans to the expanding frontier.

This was often more than a purely rhetorical relationship. The investment and savings of free black Northerners were significant in this period, as an emerging group of connected merchants, tradesmen, clergy, financiers, and political figures staked their claim to American capitalism. Like those emigrants studied by Magee and Thompson, who were able to use imperial networks and infrastructure to support families back home or invest in projects in the British colonial empire, these internal US migrants preferred to stay within a system that recognized their social and financial investments.¹¹² The New York African Society for Mutual Relief and the Free African Society in Philadelphia had both invested in local banks, and in Pennsylvania an African American man even sat on the board of a bank.¹¹³ Between 1820 and 1837, property ownership declined among African Americans in Philadelphia, from 11.6% to 7.7%, but, as Gary Nash points out, the average value of those properties more than doubled.¹¹⁴ Northern black elites who had invested in property and bank stocks were unlikely to favour emigration. This differed from the experience of some of the black planter elite in the Carolinas, who chose to emigrate to Liberia after increasingly strict laws about property ownership and investment made their own financial situations ever more precarious. An 'extract of a letter from a colored gentleman of wealth and respectability in Philadelphia', for example, emphasized that the project of colonization in Africa would mean for free African Americans that 'we are deprived of our birthright' as American citizens, which included protection by the laws of the United States and the economic and civil benefits gained from its position in the world.¹¹⁵ Magee and Thompson point out that, outside imperial networks and in much of the literature on migration, 'one finds that the relationship between migration and effective networking is rather nebulous. Since social capital is community-specific, emigration is generally regarded as deleterious to its formation ... the costs borne by the emigrant are both financial and psychic.'¹¹⁶ This was the case for Brazilian emigrants to Lagos, as well as for Liberian settlers, because they were forced to create new social networks and, in many cases, accumulate capital from scratch.¹¹⁷ Emigration to another country would wipe out both capital and social investments, forcing these entrepreneurs to build up again from the beginning.

Some of these invested funds and savings were also used for purchasing and speculating in western frontier real estate, however. For example, Juliet Walker has described the

111 *Liberator*, 28 January 1832, p. 14.

112 Magee and Thompson, *Empire and globalisation*, p. 56.

113 Walker, *History of black business*, pp. 112–13.

114 Nash, *Forging freedom*, p. 248.

115 Letter quoted in Garrison, *Thoughts on African colonization*, pp. 58–9.

116 Magee and Thompson, *Empire and globalisation*, p. 55.

117 Lindsay, 'Brazilian immigration', p. 28.

activities of Free Frank, a former slave who purchased 759 acres in Kentucky and 800 acres in Illinois through state land grants.¹¹⁸ He even established his own town in Illinois, called New Philadelphia. William Leidesdorff, one of the wealthiest antebellum African Americans, was involved with California real estate, particularly speculating, purchasing, building, and developing in San Francisco.¹¹⁹ The National Colored Convention recommended investing in commercial agriculture in the West ‘where the *plough-share* of prejudice has as yet been unable to penetrate the soil’.¹²⁰ These capital investments in the American West and the imagined possibilities that they represented were not available to all, but they helped some African Americans connect with western expansion more readily than with Liberian colonization. The combination of rhetorical and physical or financial attachment to America encouraged those from the northern states, and those with means, to make the most of the ‘sufficient land in the United States’.

Changing attitudes

With the expansion of US territory through the Mexican War (1846–48) – a war entangled in the extension of slave territory – and the declaration of Liberia’s independence from the ACS in 1847, African American attitudes toward American expansion and Liberian settlement became more positive. This sentiment was encouraged by a variety of media – letters, photographs, memoirs, and newspapers – sent by Liberians who were eager to expand their population. By the late 1840s and 1850s letters and testimonials attempted to depict Liberia as a newly independent black republic that had overcome some of the growing pains that it experienced in the early years. One settler, Isaac Dean, who signed his name with a mark, was in possession of considerable farmland, and directed his heirs that ‘neither of them shall sell or cause to be sold any part of the property but the property is to be kept together and inherited from heir to heir’.¹²¹ While the successful cultivation of farmland demonstrated Dean’s self-possession and self-discipline, its bequest to subsequent generations indicated their inherited freedoms.¹²² Descriptions of Liberian houses at this time depict typical middle-class Victorian living conditions. One passer-by commented on the decoration of President Roberts’ house, which contained ‘folding doors, walls hung with oil portraits, a tapestry carpet, embroidered curtains, and numerous books and ornaments’.¹²³ Indeed, visitors reported of Monrovia that ‘instead of a little and insignificant hamlet, as had

118 Walker, *History of black business*, pp. 122–3.

119 *Ibid.*, p. 124.

120 Howard Holman Bell, ed., *Minutes of the proceedings of the National Negro Conventions, 1830–1864*, New York: Arno Press, 1969, p. 28, emphasis in original. See also Walker, *History of black business*, p. 123; Sidbury, *Becoming African*, p. 196.

121 Liberian Archives, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Last Will and Testament of Isaac Dean, 3 June 1854.

122 ‘The plantation slave system linked self-possession to possession of the land ... for slaves, achieving freedom would mean, prominently, achieving the right to the land on which they labored so they could produce food for themselves and their families ... And achieving that right, in turn, depended in part on demonstrating that they *could* make the land productive – that they had the intelligence and self-discipline to master nature’ (Smith, *African American environmental thought*, p. 19).

123 Tyler-McGraw, *African republic*, p. 158.

been represented to us, we found it one of the most pleasant villages that I have seen. The town is regularly laid out, with fine wide streets, running parallel, and their public buildings compared well with many that I have seen in the United States.¹²⁴ At the same time, paintings of Liberia following the conventions of American frontier images or depicting American-style houses and street scenes filtered back from Monrovia as part of an ongoing ACS propaganda campaign.¹²⁵

Though Liberia's independence from the controversial ACS was certainly significant in changing the attitudes of some African Americans previously hostile towards African emigration, changing frontier dynamics in both Africa and America were also important. The Liberians depicted themselves as having 'tamed' the frontier – and the indigenous peoples – of the country. The *Liberia Herald* alerted readers that 'the entire territories of Grand Cape Mount, Sugaree and Manna, on the north west, and the territory of Grand Cess on the south east, are now integral parts of the Republic of Liberia', and that, rather than winning this new land through war, 'The aborigines of those tracts have incorporated themselves with us, and are subject to, and entitled in common to all the benefits and protection of the government and laws of this Republic.' The *Herald* assured its readers that 'the Liberian Authorities will be able to abolish speedily from among the tribes occupying those tracts, the barbarous customs ... Now the whole power and influence of the government may be successfully exerted in introducing among them the blessings of civilization and Christianity.'¹²⁶ Liberian settlers continued to expand beyond the borders of their country, absorbing neighbouring indigenous and settler territories alike – including, in 1857, at the request of its inhabitants, the separate colony of Maryland in Liberia – and continuing to pursue the civilizing mission.¹²⁷

In the US, once 'manifest destiny' was fully articulated as a white, Anglo-Saxon expansionist doctrine in the mid 1840s, free African Americans who had participated in the settlement of the early frontier were excluded from the vision of America's newest states.¹²⁸ The imagined neutrality of the frontier middle ground was called into question with a series of events in the 1840s: African American settlements in Ohio were abandoned as a result of racial violence; the Mexican territories promoted by the Philadelphian writer were more than halved by US annexations after the war; and the extension of the Missouri Compromise line to the Pacific with the Compromise of 1850 divided the rest of the continent into slave and free territories. Some western states took this as a signal to ban further black settlement.¹²⁹ All of these were compounded by the Fugitive Slave Act in 1850 and

124 LCP, Thomas J. Fuller, Jr, *Journal of a voyage to Liberia, and a visit to several of its settlements*, Baltimore, MD: John D. Toy, 1851, pp. 13–14.

125 See Dalila Scruggs, 'Colonization pictures as primary documents', <http://www.vcdh.virginia.edu/liberia/pages/scruggs.html> (consulted 7 November 2011).

126 *Liberia Herald*, 31 August 1849.

127 ACSP, reel 156, series IB vol. 6, parts 1–2, Roberts to McLain, 22 February 1853; Wiley, *Slaves no more*, Seaborn Evans to Josiah Sibley, 5 November 1856.

128 John M. Belohlavek, 'Race, progress, and destiny: Caleb Cushing and the quest for American empire', in Sam W. Haynes and Christopher Morris, eds., *Manifest destiny and empire: American antebellum expansion*, College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 1997.

129 Walker, *History of black business*, p. 124.

the Dred Scott decision in 1857. The frontier was no longer full of possibility for African Americans; as the US expanded, so too did its racial divisions.

In 1854, the Indiana Colonization Society sponsored a visit to Liberia by their 'coloured agent', the Reverend John McKay. His report demonstrates that even those living in what were once the frontier states of the West were increasingly tempted by the possibility of overseas emigration. McKay wrote of Liberia that 'my expectations were more than realized, for I found [Monrovia] making just pretensions to the character and position of a commercial city ... its buildings, presenting rather an imposing appearance ... the inhabitants are contented and happy'.¹³⁰ An account by one black Canadian noted that 'some colored people have come in from the free States, on account of the fugitive slave bill, and bought land. The farms are usually from fifty to one hundred acres.'¹³¹ Canada was an increasingly popular destination for both fugitive slaves and other African Americans. But even Canada was not perceived as entirely safe from America's voracious expansion, a sentiment that the editor of the *Liberia Herald* played upon in warning readers in America, 'Better come to Liberia ... Should Canada be annexed to the United States you will have to run for it again.'¹³²

Despite the growing political influence of black leaders such as Frederick Douglass, James McCune Smith, and Henry Highland Garnet, and the increasing strength of the political abolition movement, a growing minority remained dissatisfied with life in America and saw the improving situation in Liberia as a sign that they should move to Africa.¹³³ In response, a hardening attitude against extraterritorial emigration emerged among the abolitionist leadership, rejecting a number of colonization plans that had previously been preferred to Liberia.¹³⁴ Douglass, for instance, argued that 'it is far more noble on the part of the free colored people to remain here, struggling against the adverse winds of prejudice and slavery, than selfishly to quit the country with a view of bettering their own condition'. However, as his frequent correspondent and a colonization supporter, Benjamin Coates, pointed out, 'I think you would hardly like to be judged by your own principles. Were you not born in Maryland? Does not slavery exist there? And have you not left your brethren in bonds, to settle (call it colonize or emigrate, as you please) in Western New York, to breathe the air of freedom.'¹³⁵ While Coates admitted to being facetious, Garnet eventually decided that emigration was the answer.¹³⁶ He supported Liberia and the newly founded Liberian Agriculture and Emigration Society. Other African

130 John McKay, *On Liberia*, Indianapolis, IN: A. H. Brown, 1854, p. 6.

131 Drew, *North-side view*, p. 190.

132 Quoted in Clegg, *Price of liberty*, p. 174. War with Canada was highly unlikely, but its spectre arose from time to time in the antebellum period, and the rapid expansion of the US in the 1840s may have given the *Liberia Herald* enough room to push this line in encouraging migrants to choose Liberia over Canada.

133 *Ibid.*, p. 174.

134 Winks, *Blacks in Canada*, p. 143.

135 Frederick Douglass to Horace Greeley, quoted in a letter from Benjamin Coates to Frederick Douglass, 17 July 1850, in Emma J. Lapansky-Werner and Margaret Hope Bacon, eds., *Back to Africa: Benjamin Coates and the colonization movement in America, 1848-1880*, University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005, pp. 64-5.

136 Dixon, *African America*, p. 65.

emigrationists such as Martin Delaney were more interested in Nigeria and the Gold Coast, seeing Liberia as forever tainted by its association with the ACS, but even Delaney's stance helped to raise positive impressions of Liberia. The change in African American leaders' opinions of emigration and colonization was noted in the *Liberia Herald* as early as 1849. Quoting an article from the *Journal of Commerce*, it reported that 'The free colored men of the United States ... after abusing the Colony without mercy for many years, are beginning to look upon it with a considerable degree of favor.'¹³⁷

Liberia saw a growth of immigration in this period: emigration from the US rose from a total of 1,891 in the period 1834–47 (and a total Americo-Liberian population of 5,051) to 5,888 for the period 1848–60, more than doubling the size of the colony.¹³⁸ Although some of this growth was the result of greater access to steam transport through the newly commissioned *Liberia Packet*, increased Liberian migration fitted into a broader global picture of mass movement during the 1850s, which included an increase in general 'back to Africa' movements in places such as Brazil and the Caribbean, and an increase in labour migration throughout the British, French, and American empires – including growing immigration into the US.¹³⁹

Conclusions

This article has demonstrated that African Americans responded to different motivating factors and put forward different interpretations of their role in the expansionary and 'civilizational' projects of nineteenth-century America. Different regions, classes, and parts of the diaspora experienced American expansion in different ways: the Kru and Glebo were on the receiving end of expansion, and migrated as itinerant labourers; the enslaved in America were sent to participate in the settlement of the 'New South'; free and manumitted black Americans took their families abroad, to spread civilization and Christianity and to develop their own opportunities; and other free black Americans participated in American territorial expansion through migration or the investment of their finances.

Examining this traditionally 'national' story of abolition and colonization rivalry within the framework of global migrations, colonization paradigms, and imperial expansions allows historians to understand the decisions of individual African Americans to emigrate, migrate, or remain where they were born. This study helps to explain the context of African diaspora migration, emigration, and colonization in the nineteenth century: why certain types of settler ended up in Liberia; why others chose to stay in the US; how the 'push' factors from the US and the 'pull' factors from a variety of migration destinations fitted

137 *Liberia Herald*, 17, 12, 29 October 1849, article quoted from the *Journal of Commerce*; Tyler-McGraw, *African republic*, p. 79.

138 Alexander, *African or American*, p. 145; Tyler-McGraw, *African republic*, pp. 166–7; Burin, *Slavery*, table 2.

139 *Thirtieth annual report of the American Society for Colonizing the Free People of Color of the United States* Washington, DC, 1846, p. 39; Martin Lynn, 'Technology, trade, and "a race of native capitalists": the Krio diaspora of West Africa and the steamship, 1852–1895', *Journal of African History*, 33, 1992, pp. 421–40.

into a global picture of migration; and how those decisions affected the development of the Liberian Republic. Looking at the project in the context of global nineteenth-century migrations, we find that African Americans were active participants in the shaping of America's expansion, for both practical *and* ideological reasons.

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